

Gov. Kathleen Blanco
Joint Katrina Committees
Monday, Oct. 3, 2005

Chairman Boasso, Chairman Alario, members of the committees, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you this morning about how Louisiana responded to Hurricane Katrina and about what we are doing to restore our state-- for our people

This is important work. I'm making my staff and cabinet available to assist and support you in every possible way.

Five weeks ago today Hurricane Katrina altered our lives and our state forever.

Hundreds of our citizens have lost their lives, victims of this tragic storm and its aftermath. Hundreds of thousands of our citizens are displaced, scattered across this country -- many of them homeless, jobless and unsure of the future.

Thousands of businesses have been destroyed or displaced, creating a potential wave of unemployment and suffering.

I know many of you here this morning and many of your colleagues in the Legislature have lost homes and businesses.

Katrina knocked us to our knees. While we were pulling ourselves up, Rita hit us hard. But not even a pair of massive hurricanes can keep Louisiana down.

Those hurricanes touched every part of Louisiana. As the coast suffered, the rest of the state opened its arms to neighbors from the south. They opened their homes their churches, their hearts.

The ravages of Katrina and Rita have unified this state in ways we never imagined.

And, we need a unified Louisiana for the enormous task ahead-- restoring much of South Louisiana -- all the way from Texas to Mississippi.

First, we bring our families home. How?

With jobs,

With homes

With restored communities

First, we make our cities safe and secure. That means New Orleans and South Louisiana will be reborn on a foundation of stronger and more secure levees. We will not restore our communities and our economy until we secure the area from the ravages of another hurricane.

We will reunite Louisiana workers with their jobs and Louisiana businesses with their workers. We will make sure Louisianians rebuild Louisiana.

The task appears enormous. But not when we tackle it together. I will depend on your able advice, insight and experience as we address this challenge one project at a time.

We are moving ahead.

Just last week, I met with business leaders to discuss how we rebuild the economy and recover our workforce. I asked for their opinions and what their greatest needs are.

Ladies and gentlemen, the business leadership in the affected areas are as committed as I am to restoring Louisiana.

Last week, I testified before the Senate Finance Committee in Washington on proposals that will resurrect Louisiana businesses and create jobs for Louisiana workers.

The package I discussed would give our businesses quick access to the short-term capital they desperately need.

I support President Bush's call for a Gulf Opportunity Zone that will recruit our people back into New Orleans and south Louisiana and encourage private investment in reconstruction.

We propose up to 30 billion dollars in tax-exempt "Hurricane Recovery" bonds. This will dramatically lower the cost of capital to companies of all sizes.

A job-creation tax credit would motivate large companies with significant payrolls to remain in the region.

I asked Congress to consider a 10 billion dollar Louisiana Business Development Fund to provide grants to small businesses that return to the affected areas of our state.

And that's what we need in the face of this massive suffering and heartbreak . Jobs. We need jobs to bring our people home and restore our economy.

After I testified, I spent the rest of the day on the Hill fighting for:

- housing and insurance relief for our families
- jobs for our workers – especially in the reconstruction
- aid for local governments
- loans, grants and work for our businesses

I asked them to support innovative ways to finance the long-term rebuilding of South Louisiana and to back provisions that give businesses – especially small businesses – the immediate help they need to survive.

Along with creating jobs, interim housing is critical to our recovery. Tomorrow, in conjunction with FEMA, we are reporting on the progress of our housing recovery plan.

Kim Hunter Reed, our housing team leader, will detail how this comprehensive plan is moving people into temporary housing.

Our temporary housing plan is moving people out of shelters, out of hotels, out of their in-laws' houses and into communities close to jobs and close to schools.

We have an opportunity to rebuild our communities better than before with stronger levees, better schools and community-based health care.

With local leaders as partners, I believe we will succeed.

Part of getting our communities and our businesses up and running again is having our local governments providing basic services. Every community must have police and fire protection, sewage and water service. The storms destroyed or crippled the tax bases in several parishes.

That's why I've asked President Bush and congressional leaders to change the rules of the Stafford Act. We need federal aid to cover more than overtime pay for public employees.

This afternoon, I will meet with parish and local officials to talk about their critical needs and their inability to cover immediate costs.

Our cities and parishes need to make payroll. They must pay the men and women who provide those basic services or the recovery will come to a standstill.

We all know much of the money must come from the federal government. Federal and state taxpayers should know that we are demanding accountability for every dollar invested in the rebuilding.

Our Commissioner of Administration, state Treasurer, Inspector General and Legislative Auditor are watching the money. To set an even-higher standard, we will name a Big Four accounting firm as an independent watchdog.

The top national finance and accounting associations will help select that firm.

Louisiana rebirth will come from the ground up. Local leaders will identify the critical issues in their towns, cities, parishes and regions. The state will be a constructive partner in this planning process.

To manage this task, I have organized my administration into eight recovery teams.

- Economy/Workforce
- Education
- Environment
- Family Services
- Fiscal Stability
- Health
- Housing
- Transportation and Infrastructure

Each team will:

- Identify critical issues
- Form advisory councils to gather input and Analyze potential solutions
- Develop specific plans of action
- Set goals
- Make clear, timely progress reports
- and ... closely co-ordinate with local planners

I have also asked each of our statewide elected officials to take leadership roles in this rebuilding effort.

Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu has been helpful throughout this crisis with help and valued counsel. He is already focusing on restoring our tourism industry—the bread and butter of the South Louisiana economy.

Secretary of State Al Ater has an enormous job ahead of him: make voting more accessible for our people scattered across the country. They've been displaced. They must not be disenfranchised.

Attorney General Charles Foti has been fighting fraud. He is also working with our Supreme Court to restart our judicial systems in the affected areas. Attorney General Foti and his staff have worked closely and continuously with me and my staff on pressing legal issues.

Treasurer John Kennedy continues to help with our fiscal accountability program and help local governments manage their debt.

Agriculture Commissioner Bob Odom will continue to lead recovery efforts for our agriculture and timber industries. We've suffered great agricultural losses and there's a lot of work to do.

Finally, many people are worried about their insurance coverage.

Insurance Commissioner Robert Wooley is working with us to help families get the insurance compensation they deserve and to make sure the industry stays in Louisiana to insure what's here and what we will rebuild.

As you may know, McKinsey and Company, a globally respected management consulting firm, has donated its services to Louisiana.

They will help me and our recovery teams develop their plans and strategies. Most importantly, they will help us identify and overcome roadblocks and develop a system to measure our progress.

Restoring South Louisiana after two of the largest natural disasters in American history might appear daunting but, with these teams, with our people, with our faith we will succeed.

We have major challenges ahead in shaping our economy, our communities, our landscape, our state government and our relationships with each other.

I want to be realistic about the new economic realities we face. We've lost revenues from more than one third of our economy. That leaves us with a shortfall that we could not have imagined six weeks ago.

I've asked Jerry Luke LeBlanc, the leader of our fiscal stability team, to immediately review these budget issues with the Legislature. Reduced resources mean we must cut spending.

There is no such thing as business as usual in Louisiana. There will be reductions in the size and scope of state government. Together, WE will make decisions that will affect departments, jurisdictions, and agencies in all areas of Louisiana.

These challenges will test us all.

In recent weeks, much has been said and written about the state's response to Katrina. I want to tell you and the people of Louisiana about some of the things that your state government did to prepare for and respond to Katrina.

By the time Katrina hit our shores, Louisiana had taken some important first steps:

- The state of emergency I declared had been in effect for three days.
- The Louisiana National Guard had been activated for three days. Thousands of troops with equipment and supplies were in New Orleans and at the edge of the storm zone.
- Wildlife and Fisheries agents and hundreds of boats began rescue work in 40 mile per hour gale-force winds.
- I had personally and repeatedly urged residents of coastal areas and New Orleans to get out of Katrina's path.

The evacuation was an efficient operation that safely moved people out of harm's way.

The plan worked without major traffic jams or scores of stranded motorists. I know that untold thousands of lives were saved because those people heeded our warnings.

By the evening of Sunday, August 28th we had successfully evacuated more than a million residents from Southeast Louisiana.

I spent those days after landfall directing our resources to respond to the largest natural disaster in America's history. My office commandeered buses from across the state to move tens of thousands to safety.

By air and by water, the National Guard and Wildlife agents, working side by side with the U.S. Coast, saved thousands. These efforts were supplemented by heroic efforts of our citizens, like some of you on this committee.

In those first days after Katrina struck, we were making life-saving decisions, using all our resources and energies to rescue people.

Then, unfortunately, we had to turn our attention to Hurricane Rita. Our evacuation efforts again saved lives. Rescue efforts once again were necessary when communities were inundated with storm surge waters – now ruining even more homes and businesses and displacing even more Louisiana citizens.

As we are now moving past the rescue challenges presented by Rita, now is the time to begin to analyze and improve the state and local response to future disasters.

The real stories of the response to Katrina and Rita are the stories of the courageous men and women who risked their lives to save lives.

The real stories of how we restore the communities of South Louisiana have yet to be told.

When they are, they will be stories of working together across lines that once divided us: economic, geographic, and societal.

They will be stories of innovation, determination and hard work creating new communities from the rubble. Communities that are better, stronger, smarter.

The task is large, but not too large for a unified Louisiana.

There's something in the food. There's something in the music. And there's something in our hearts that gives us the spirit ... the faith ... and the strength to succeed and to bring our people home.